

## THE AVATARS.

BY THE EDITOR.

CHRISTIANITY has gathered into one focus the light of the religious evolution of the various civilisations. Like a great river, it has not one source, but originates from the conflux of several streams. It has inherited the theology of the Jews with its stern monotheism, the philosophy of the Greeks in the form of Philo's Neo-Platonism, and the incarnation idea of the Hindus. The conception of a God-man as the Son of God was a blasphemous idea to the pious Jew, and we find no trace of it in the Old Testament; but it was a natural idea among the pagans, which, however, had to be purified and chastened before it could be received as one of the most important factors in the religious movement of the Christian era.

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India, the primitive home of religion and philosophy, exhibits as strong a tendency for monism as the Persian nation has shown for dualism. But the ancient monism of India is apt to lose itself in Pantism,<sup>1</sup>—a theory of the All according to which the absolute alone is possessed of reality, while all concrete existences are a mere sham, an illusion, a dream. The polytheism of the popular Hinduism is practically a pantheism in which the discrimination between good and evil is entirely lost sight of. Thus the struggle between good and evil is contemplated as a process of repeated God-incarnations made necessary, according to the idea of the Brâhmans, by the appearance of tyranny and injustice, lack of reverence for the priests, encroachments of the warrior caste on the supremacy of the Brâhmans, or some other disorder. While the enemies of the gods—giants, demons, and other monsters—are not

<sup>1</sup> Pantism, the theory of the All (from  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ , root  $\Pi\text{ANT}$ ), is different from Pantheism, the theory which identifies the All ( $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ ) with God ( $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ ).

radically bad, and cannot be regarded as devils in the sense of the Christian Satan, the Brâhman gods in their turn are by no means the representatives of pure goodness. Not only do they frequently assume shapes that to the taste of Western nations would be exceedingly ugly and diabolical, but the same deities who in one aspect are beneficent powers of life, are in another respect demons of destruction.

Brahm, the highest god of Brâhmanism, represents the All, or the abstract idea of being. He is conceived as a trinity which is called Trimûrti, consisting of Brahmâ, Vishṇu, and Śiva.

Brahmâ, the first-originated of all beings, the lord of all creatures, the father of all the universes, is the divine mind who is the beginning of all. He is called *Aja*, the not-born, because he has originated, but was not begotten.

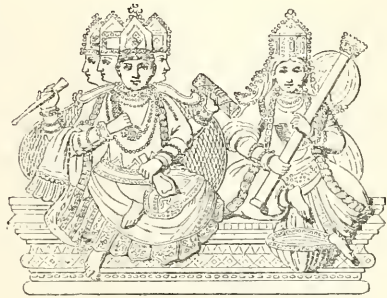
Brahmâ originated from *tat*, i. e., undifferentiated being, in which he existed from eternity in an embryonic form.

Brahmâ's consort, Sarasvatî, also called Brahmi or Brahmini, is the goddess of poetry, learning, and music.

Brahmâ is the creator of man. We are told in the Yajurveda that the god produced from himself the soul, which is accordingly a part of his own being, and clothed it with a body—a process which is reported in the reverse order in the Hebrew Genesis, where Elohim creates first the body and then breathes the life into the body, which makes of man a living soul.

Brahmâ is pictured with four heads and four hands, in which he holds a spoon, a sacrificial basin, a rosary, and the Vedas. One of the four hands is frequently represented as empty. He sits on a lotus which grows from Vishṇu's navel, representing the spirit that broods over the waters.

Brahmâ keeps the first place in the speculations of philosophers, where he is identified with the life-breath of the world, the Âtman or self that appears in man's soul, but he has not exercised a great influence on the people. The gods of the people must be less abstract, more concrete and more human. Thus it is natural that Vishṇu, the second person of the trinity, the deity of

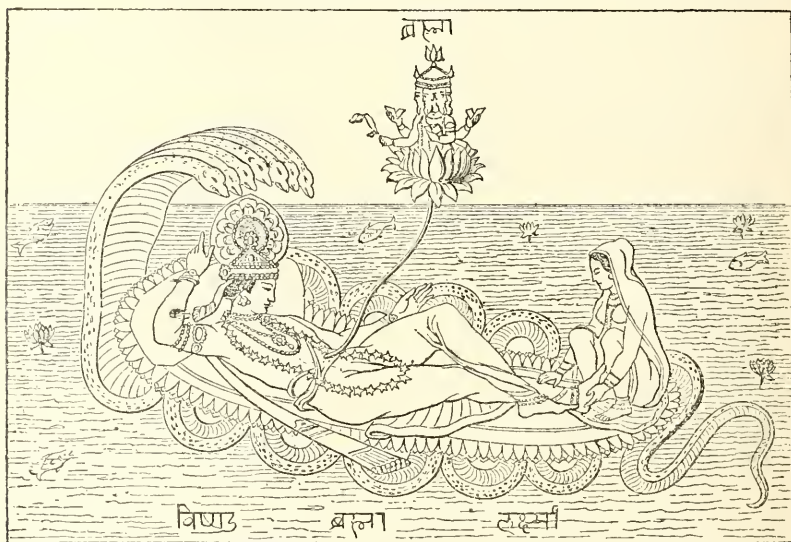


BRAHMA AND SURASWATI.  
(Reproduced from Coleman.)

avatars or incarnations, is, for all practical purposes, by far more important than Brahmâ.

Vishṇu appears in ten incarnations, which are as follows :<sup>1</sup>

In the first incarnation, called the Matsya-Avatar, Vishṇu assumes the form of a fish in order to recover the Vedas stolen by evil demons and hidden in the floods of a deluge that covered the whole earth. This incarnation is of interest because we read in the *Pistis Sophia* (one of the most important gnostic books) that the books of Ieou, which were dictated by God to Enoch in para-



VISHNU, LAKSHMI, AND BRAHMA.

[Vishnu reclines on a flower, supported by the serpent Ananta (a symbol of eternity), floating on the primeval waters of the undifferentiated world-substance.] After a native illustration, reproduced from Coleman.

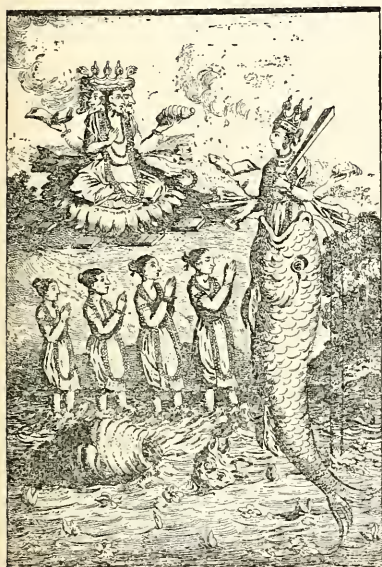
dise, were preserved by Kalapataurôth from destruction in the deluge.<sup>2</sup>

In order to enable the gods to procure the immortality-giving drink, amṛita, Vishṇu appeared as an immense tortoise in the kûrm-avata, his second incarnation. He lifted on his back the world-pillar, the mountain Mandaras; and the world-serpent, Vâsuki (or Anantas, i. e., infinite), was wound about it like a rope. The gods

<sup>1</sup>Since it is our intention to be brief, we do not enter in this exposition of the ten avatars into any details that could be omitted and neglect to mention the variants of the myths.

<sup>2</sup>MS., p. 354, English translation from Schwartz's latest translation by G. R. S. Meade, p. 354.

seized the tail, the demons (daityas) the head, and they began to churn the ocean, which produced Vishṇu's gem, Kaustubha; Varuṇânî, the goddess of the sea; the Apsaras, lovely sprites, corresponding to the Greek nymphs; Indra's horse, with seven heads; Kâmadhenu, the cow of plenty; Airâvata, Indra's elephant; the tree of abundance; Chandra, the god of the moon; Surâ, the goddess of wine; and, finally, Dhanvantari, the Indian Æsculapius, who is in possession of the water of life. The serpent began now to spit venom, which blinded the demons, while the gods drank the amṛita.



THE MATSYA AVATAR OR FISH INCARNATION.



THE KURMA AVATAR OR TORTOISE INCARNATION.<sup>1</sup>

The third incarnation is the Varâha-avatar, in which Vishṇu, in the shape of a wild boar, kills, with his tusks, the demon Hiranyâksha, who threatened to destroy the world.

Hiranyâksha's brother, Hiranya-Kaśipu, had a son by the name of Prahlâda, who was a pious devotee of Vishṇu. The unnatural father tried to kill his son, but the latter escaped all danger because he did not cease to pray to Vishṇu. When Hiranya-Kaśipu expressed a doubt of Vishṇu's omnipresence, mockingly declaring that he could not possibly be in a column to which he

<sup>1</sup> All the Avatar pictures are from Pickart.



pointed, the wrathful god decided to punish the scoffer. The column rent in twain, and Vishṇu, proceeding from its interior in the shape of a monster half man half lion, tore Hiraṇya Kaśipu to pieces. This fourth incarnation is called the Narasiṃha-avataṛ. Its moral is to impress upon the people the sad fate of those who do not believe in Vishṇu.

Prahlâda's grandson, Balis, was a pious king, but on that very account dangerous to the gods, for he was just about to complete the hundredth grand sacrifice, by which he would have acquired



THE VARÂHA AVATAR OR WILD BOAR  
INCARNATION.



THE NARASIṂHA AVATAR OR MAN-LION  
INCARNATION.

sufficient power to dethrone Indra. Vishṇu came to the assistance of the god of heaven and appeared before Balis as a dwarf in the guise of a Brâhman mendicant. Balis honored him with presents and promised to fulfil his desire, whereupon the dwarf requested three paces of ground. This was gladly granted under a severe oath that would be binding on gods and men. Then the dwarf assumed a huge shape and stepped with the first pace over the whole earth, with the second over the atmosphere, with the third into the infinity of the heavens. This is the reason why Vishṇu is called Tripâdas, or Trivikramas, the three-paced god. Thus Balis was prevented completing the hundredth sacrifice, and Indra was again

safe on his throne. This dwarf incarnation is called the Vâmana avatar.

The sixth incarnation, called the Parashura avatar, is historical in its character, for it reflects the struggles between the warrior-caste and the Brâhmans for supremacy. It is said that Jamadagni, a pious Brâhman, had received from the gods the miraculous cow, Kâmadughâ (or Surabhî), which provided him, his wife, Renukâ, and their son, Râma, with every luxury. Kârttavîrya, a king of the warrior-caste, visits him, and seeing the



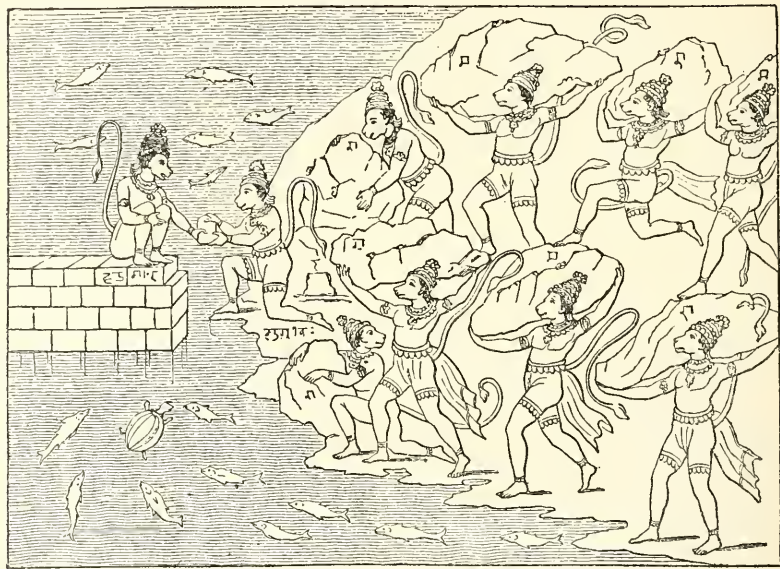
THE VÂMANA AVATAR OR DWARF  
INCARNATION.



THE PARASHURA AVATAR OR BATTLE-AX  
INCARNATION.

wealth of the Brâhman, tries to take the cow from him, but the cow kills all who dare to approach her, and rises into heaven, whereupon Kârttavîrya in his wrath slays the pious Jamadagni. Râma, the son of the murdered Brâhman, invokes Vishṇu's help for the punishment of the wicked king, and the god not only presents him with a bow and a battle-axe, which latter is called in Sanskrit *paracus*, the Greek *πέλεκυς* (hence the name of this avatar), but also incarnates himself in Râma. Kârttavîrya is described to be in possession of a thousand arms, wielding a thousand weapons, but Râma, endowed with the divine powers of Vishṇu, conquers him after a decisive struggle.

The Râma Chandra avatar has taken a firm hold on the Indian mind, and is described in the Râmâyana, an epic which is the



HANUMÂN, THE MONKEY KING, BUILDING THE BRIDGE OVER THE STRAIT BETWEEN INDIA AND LANKA. (Reproduced from Coleman.)

Hindu Odyssey, to the narrative of which the legend of Râma bears a great resemblance.

Râma Chandra lived with his wife Sîtâ (frequently regarded as an incarnation of Lakshmî) and with his half-brother Lakshmaṇa in the wilderness of the south, where he had withdrawn in order to obey his father, who had unjustly banished him and appointed Bharata, another son of his, as heir to the throne. The demon-king, Râvaṇa, waged war against Râma, and carried off Sîtâ while he and his brother were hunting. It is impossible to relate here Râma's adventures in detail on the island of Ceylon, how

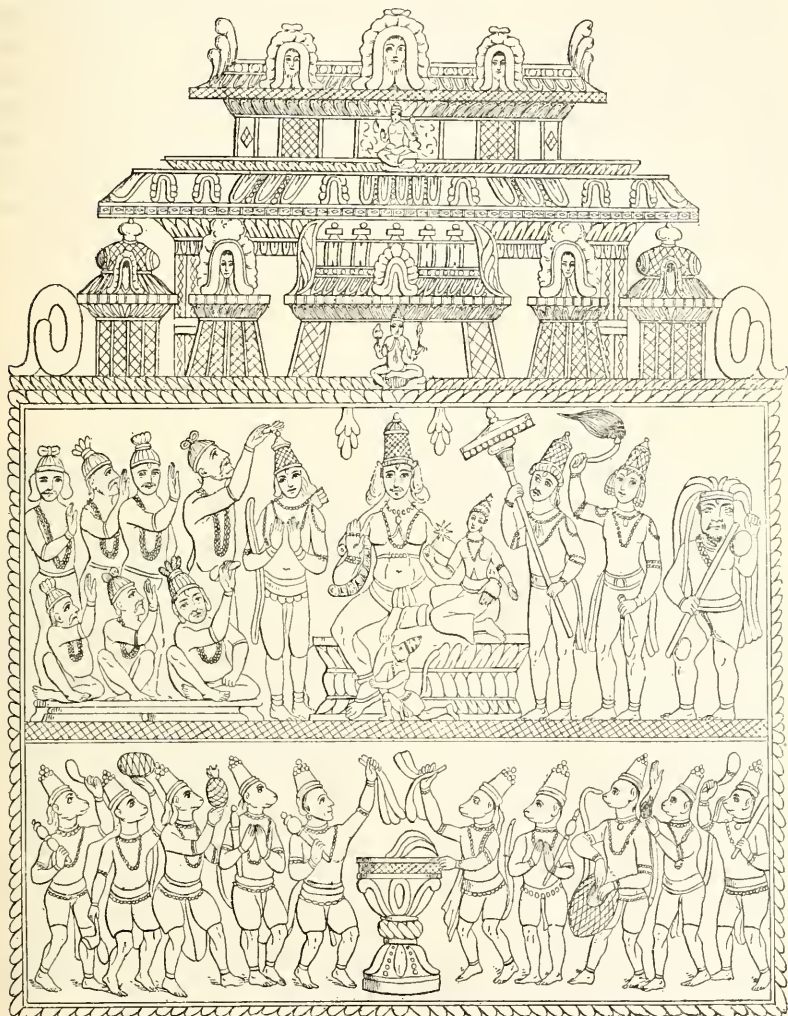


THE MONKEY KING SUGRIVA FIGHTING. (Reproduced from Coleman.)

he fought with giants and demons, how the monkey kings, Luvgriva and Hanumân, became his allies, how Hanumân jumped over to



Lanka, the island of Ceylon, to reconnoitre the enemy's country, how the monkeys built a bridge over the strait by throwing stones into the water, how Râma pursued Râvaṇa to Lanka, and finally how he vanquished Râvaṇa and recovered his faithful wife Sîtâ.



VISHNU AND SHRI-LAKSHMI AS RAMA CHANDRA AND SITA AFTER THEIR HAPPY REUNION (Reproduced from Coleman.)

Like the sixth avatar, the Râma Chandra avatar also probably contains historical reminiscences. It resembles both the Trojan War and the Gudrun Saga, the epics of Western nations that relate the story of an abducted wife. The mythical part of all these



stories describes the wanderings of the sun god in search of his consort, the moon.



HANUMÂN RECITING HIS ADVENTURES TO  
RAMA CHANDRA AND SITA.  
(Reproduced from Coleman.)

after his birth, comforted his mother, and gave directions to his father, Vasudeva, how to save him. Vasudeva carried the infant, pro-

In his eighth incarnation, the Krishna avatar, Vishnu has reached the ideal man-god of the Hindus. Kaṇsa, called Kalâṅkura (i. e., crane), the tyrant of Mathurâ, prophesies that the eighth son of his sister, Devakî, will take his throne. He therefore decides to kill all the children of his sister. Her eighth son, Kṛishṇa, however, was an incarnation of Vishnu, who spoke at once



THE RÂMA CHANDRA AVATAR.

Vishnu and his incarnation in Rama Chandra, assisted by the Monkey King Hanumân, vanquish Ravana.



THE KRISHNA AVATAR.

Vishnu is born as Krishna and miraculously saved from the prosecutions of the tyrant of Mathurâ.

tected by the serpent king, over the river Jamunâ, and exchanged him in Gokula for a girl which Yasuda had just borne to the cow-

herd, Nanda. Kāṣa seized at once the girl baby, but before he could kill her she raised herself into the air, explained to the wrathful king that Kṛishṇa had been saved, and disappeared in the form of lightning. Kāṣa now decided to have all the babies in his empire killed, but Kṛishṇa escaped again. A demon nurse was sent to poison him with her venomous milk, but he bit and killed her, while his stepfather decided to remove to a more distant country in order to escape the continued hostilities of the king. Kṛishṇa slew the huge serpent, Kali-naga, overcame the giant Shishoo-polu, killed the monster bird that tried to peck out his eyes, and also a malignant wild ass. He burnt the entrails of the alligator-shaped

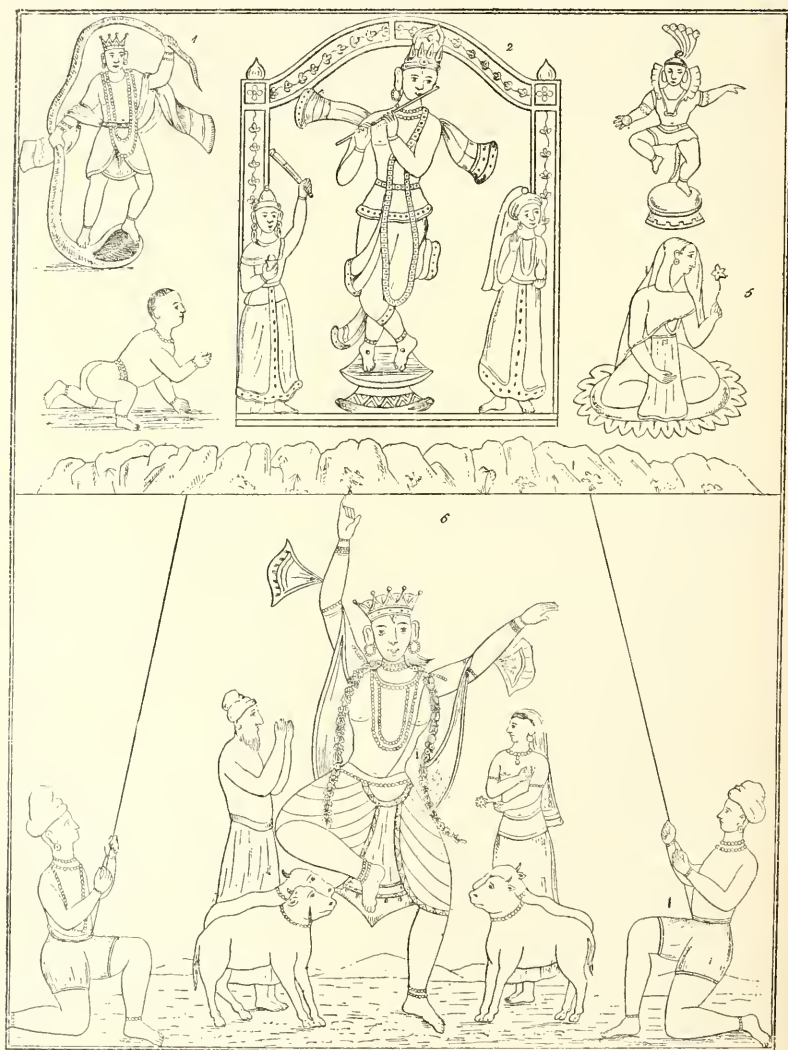


KRISHNA, THE FAVORITE OF THE COUNTRY LASSES OF GOKULA.

(Reproduced from Coleman.)

Peck-Assoort who had devoured him, and choked Aghi-Assoor, the dragon who attempted to swallow him. When Kṛishṇa had grown to youth he became the favorite of the lasses of Gokula. When he played the flute every one of the dancing girls believed that the swain whom she embraced was Kṛishṇa himself. He fell in love with the country girl Râdhâ, the story of which is sung in the Jagadeva's poem, Gîtâgovinda. He protected the cowherds against storm and fire, and finally marched against Kāṣa, killed him and took possession of his throne.

Kṛishṇa plays also a prominent part in the Mahâbhârata, the Iliad of the Hindus, which describes the war between the Kurus and the Pândus,<sup>1</sup> both descendants of Bharata and both grand-



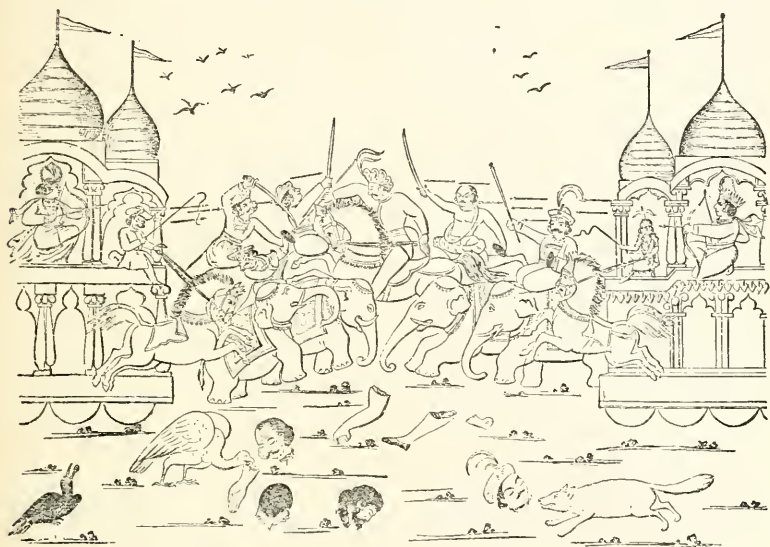
KRISHNA'S ADVENTURES. (Reproduced from Coleman.)

children of Vyâsa. Dhṛitarâshtra, the father of the Kurus, was king of Hastinâpur, but being blind, Bhîshma, his uncle, reigned in his stead. After a test of the faculties of the young princes, in

<sup>1</sup> The Pândus are also called Pândavas, and the Kurus Kamavas.



which the Pându Arjuna, the skilled bowman and the Hindu Tell, showed himself superior to all the others, the oldest Pându-prince, Yudhishthira, was installed as heir apparent. The Kurus, however, who managed to remain in power, tried to burn the Pândus, but they escaped and lived for some time in the disguise of mendicant Brâhmans. Having allied themselves, by marriage with Draupadî,<sup>1</sup> the daughter of Drupada, king of Panchâla, with a powerful monarch, the Pândus reappeared at Hastinâpur and induced Dhṛitarâshṭra to divide the kingdom between his sons, the Kurus, and his nephews, the Pândus; but at a festival, held at



THE BATTLE BETWEEN THE KURUS AND PANDUS ON THE FIELD OF KURUKSHETRA  
(Reproduced from Wilkins.)

Hastinâpur, Yudhishthira, the chief of the Pândus, staked in a game of dice his kingdom, all his possessions, and Draupadî herself, and lost everything. The Kurus granted their cousins to recover their share of the kingdom, after thirteen years, if they would live twelve years with Draupadî in the forest and remain another year in exile; but when this period had elapsed, the Kurus refused to give up the country or any part of it, and thus the war became unavoidable. Then Duryodhana, the Kuru prince, and Arjuna,

<sup>1</sup> That the five Pândus held Draupadî in common as their wife, proves the high antiquity of the story. Polyandry was apparently a practice not uncommon in ancient times. It prevails still to-day among the less cultured hill tribes. But being at variance with the Aryan customs of the age in which the Mahâbhârata was versified, Vyâsa (the Homer or "arranger" of the poem, and its supposed author) tries to explain it allegorically, Draupadî being Lakshmi, and the five Pându brothers representing five different forms of one and the same Indra.

the main hero of the Pâṇḍus, called on Kṛishṇa for securing his assistance. Kṛishṇa decided not to take an active part in the fight himself, but left to Arjuna, whom he had seen first, the choice between his (Kṛishṇa's) company as a mere adviser or his (Kṛishṇa's) army of a hundred million warriors. Arjuna chose Kṛishṇa himself, and left the hundred million warriors to his rivals, the Kurus. The two armies met on the field of Kurukshetra, near Delhi. During the battle, as we read in the Bhagavadgîtâ, Kṛishṇa accompanies Arjuna as his charioteer and explains to him the depth and breadth of the religious philosophy of the Hindus. The Pâṇḍus conquer the Kurus, and Yudhishṭhira becomes king of Hastinâpur. After sundry additional adventures the Pâṇḍus go to heaven, where they find that rest and happiness which is unattainable on earth.

The Mahâbhârata, like the Wars of the Roses, shows neither party in a favorable light; but the epic is written from the standpoint of the Pâṇḍus, whose demeanor is always extolled, while the Kurus are throughout characterised as extremely unworthy and mean.

Kṛishṇa is the Hindu Apollo, Orpheus, and Hercules in one person, and there is no god in the Hindu Pantheon who is dearer to the Brâhman heart than he. Many of his adventures, such as his escape from the Hindu Herod, the massacre of babes, his transfiguration, etc., reappear in a modified form in Buddhist legends and bear some resemblance to the events told of Christ in the New Testament.

In his ninth incarnation Vishṇu appears as Buddha, the enlightened one, to be a teacher of morals, of purity, charity, and compassionate love toward all beings. It is difficult to state the differences between the Buddha avatar of the Brâhmins and the Buddha of the Buddhists. The latter, there can be no doubt, was a historical personality, by the name of Gautama, the son of Shuddhâdana of the warrior caste, while the former is a mere ideal figure of ethical perfection. Burnouf<sup>1</sup> proposes to regard both as quite distinct, and he is right, but we need not for that reason deny that, on the one hand, the ideal of a Buddha avatar was a prominent factor in the formation of Buddhism, while on the other hand Gautama's teachings have, since the rise of Buddhism, powerfully affected and considerably modified the Buddha ideal of the Brâhmins. Whatever may be the historical relation between the Hindu Buddha and the Buddha of the Buddhists, this much is

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire du Bouddhisme*, I., 338.

sure: the Buddha has been received by the Brâhmans as one of the members of the Hindu Pantheon.

The Hindu deity that is nearest in spirit to the Buddha avatar is Jagannâth, the god of love and mercy.

The tenth avatar has not yet been completed. Vishṇu is expected to appear on a winged white horse to reward the virtuous, convert the sinners, and destroy all evil.

The horse has one foot raised, and when it places its foot down, the time of the incarnation will find its fulfilment.



THE BUDDHA AVATAR OR VISHNU'S INCARNATION AS THE ENLIGHTENED TEACHER OF MANKIND.



THE KALKI AVATAR OR THE WHITE HORSE INCARNATION.

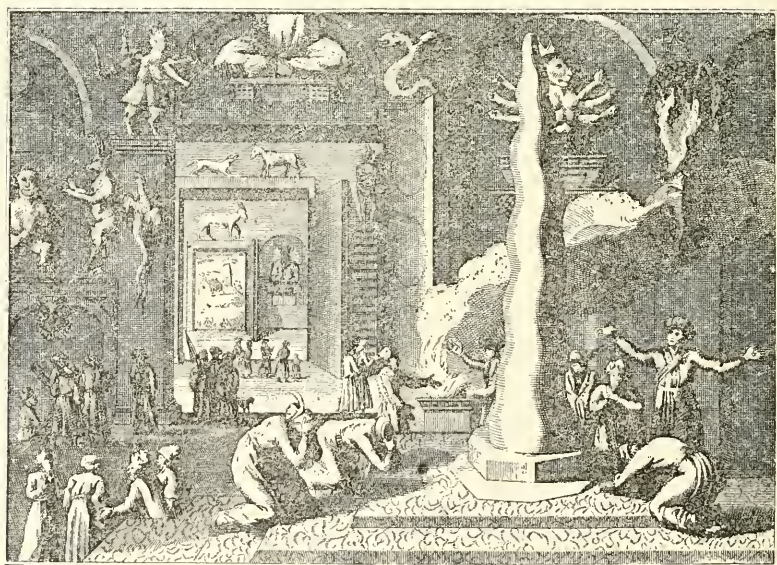
The third person of the Indian trinity is Śiva, the Auspicious One, representing the end of the world and its regeneration. He is commonly represented by the *linga* as a symbol of the creative faculty and by the all-devouring fire, the tongued flame of which is pictured in a triangle turning its point upwards  $\triangle$ .

Sir Monier Monier Williams (in *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, p. 68) says of this deity, which is "more mystical and less human than the incarnated Vishṇu," that his symbol, the *linga*, is "never in the mind of a Saiva (or Śiva-worshipper) connected with indecent ideas, nor with sexual love." The *linga*, or, as the Romans called it, the phallus, the male organ of generation, be-



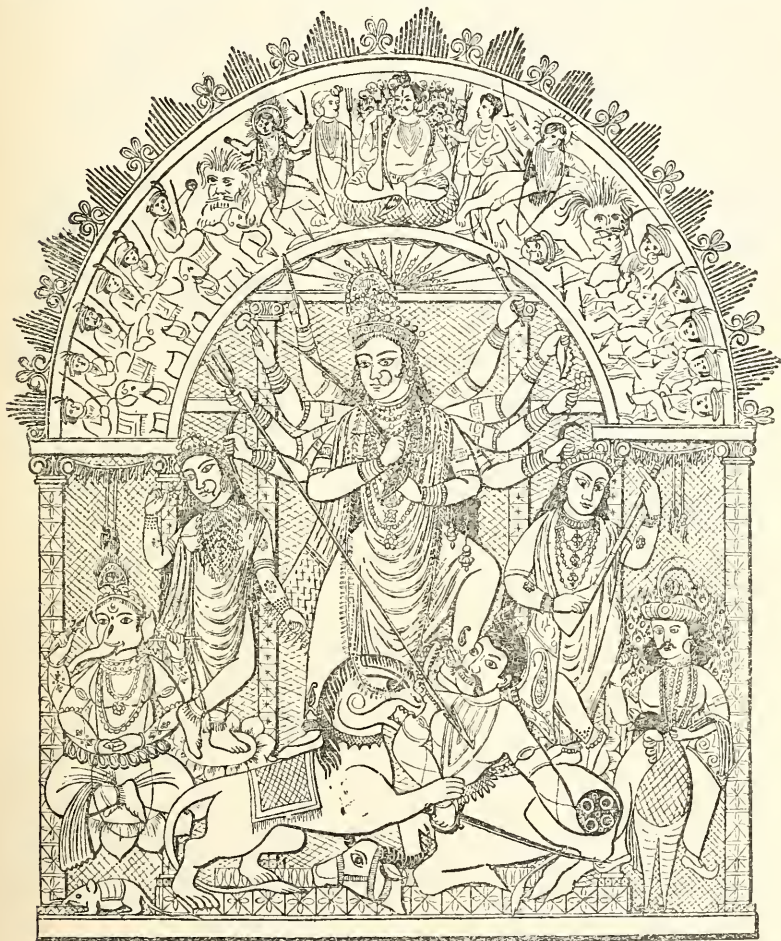


SIVA AND PARVATI. (Reproduced from Coleman.)



SIVA WORSHIP. (Reproduced from Pickart.)

comes at the first dawn of civilisation, almost among all the nations of the world, an object of great awe and reverence. As the symbol of the creative principle it is regarded as the most essential attribute of both the God-Creator himself and all those who hold authority in his name. The *linga* develops in the hand of the med-



KALI-DURGA IN THE HINDU PANTHEON. (Reproduced from Wilkins.)

icine man into a wand, in the hand of the priest into a staff, and in the hand of the king into a sceptre. The *yoni*, or female organ, is regarded as the symbol of Śiva's consort, Pârvatî, and is worshipped in connexion with the *linga* by the sect of the Sactis. Perforated rocks are considered as emblems of the *yoni*, through which pilgrims pass for the purpose of being regenerated, a ceremony in





KAMA.  
(Reproduced from Wollheim da  
Fonceka.)



SIVA SLAYING A DEMON.  
(Reproduced from Wilkins.)



AGNI. (Reproduced from Coleman.)



GANESA. (Reproduced from Coleman.)



which Hindus place great faith for its sin-expelling significance. (See Charles Coleman, *The Mythology of the Hindus*, 1832, p. 175.)

Śiva's consort, Kâlî, is one of the greatest divinities of India. She is the goddess of a hundred names, representing not only the power of nature, but also the ruthless cruelty of nature's laws. She is called Pârvatî, the blessed mother, and Durgâ, which means "hard to go through," symbolising war and all kinds of danger. She is in the pantheon of modern Hinduism the central figure; and in spite of the universality of Brahmâ in philosophical speculations, in spite of the omnipresence of Viṣṇu and his constant incarnations as told in ancient myths and legends, in spite of the omnipotence of Śiva, and the high place given him in Hindu dogmatology, she is the main recipient of Hindu worship all over the country. As Kâlî she is identified with time, the all-devourer, and is pictured as enjoying destruction, perdition, and murder in any form, trampling under foot even her own husband. There is scarcely a village without a temple devoted to her, and her images can be seen in thousands of forms. Her appearance is pleasant only as Pârvatî; in all other shapes she is frightful, and it is difficult to understand the reverence which the pious Hindu cherishes for this most diabolical deity, who among the Buddhists of Thibet is changed into a devilish demon under the name of mKha'sGrôma.

The Pantheism which lies at the bottom of the whole Hindu mythology finds expression in the worship of HariHara, who is a combination of Viṣṇu and Śiva. In the Mâhâtmya, or collection of temple legends of the HariHara shrine at HariHara, a town in the province of Mysore, Íśvara says:<sup>1</sup>

"There are heretics amongst men who reject the Vedas and the Shâstras, who live without purificatory ceremonies and established rules of conduct, and are filled with hatred of Viṣṇu: so also there are heretical followers of Viṣṇu, who are similarly filled with hatred of Shiva. All these wicked men shall go to hell so long as this world endures. I will not receive worship from any man who makes a distinction between Vasudeva and my own divinity: I will divide every such man in two with my saw. For I have assumed the form of HariHara in order to destroy the teaching that there is a difference between us: and he who knows within himself that HariHara is the god of gods, shall inherit the highest heaven."

There are in Hindu mythology innumerable other deities, among whom Indra, the thunder-god, is the greatest, as the hero among the gods of secondary rank, reminding us of the Thor of the Norsemen; but Varuṇa, the Hindu Kronos, Agni the god of fire, have also at times been very prominent.

<sup>1</sup>The legends of the Shrine of HariHara, translated from the Sanskrit by Rev. Thomas Foulkes.

There are in addition gods of third degree, such as Kâma, the Hindu Amor, Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed god of wisdom<sup>1</sup>, and Kârttikeya,<sup>2</sup> the leader of the good demons, on the peacock, both sons of Śiva, and others. In addition, we have a great number of devas, sprites, and goblins. Some of them are good, as the Gandharvas, others at least not naturally ill-intentioned, as for instance the Apsaras, (a kind of Hindu elves), but most of them are dangerous and demoniacal. Such are the general mischief-makers, the Âsuras, the Pretas, or ghosts, the Bhûtas, or spook-spirits, the baby-killing Grahas, the Râkshasas, who are either giants or vampires, not to mention all the other demons of less power and importance.

<sup>1</sup> Ganesa, which means the lord (*īsa*) of hosts (*gana*), is originally Siva himself, and he was invoked under that name by writers of books to drive away evil demons.

<sup>2</sup> Kârttikeya is also called Subrahmanya and Skanda.